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Lolita and Mendes' American Beauty**

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**Bakalářská práce**

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Lolita and Mendes' American Beauty**

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Prohlašuji, že jsem práci zpracovala samostatně a použila jen  
uvedených pramenů a literatury.

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis sets as its aim to examine the American<sup>1</sup> society by means of analysis of the way it is depicted in two selected works – the novel *Lolita* (published 1953) by Vladimir Nabokov and the film *American Beauty* (released 1999) directed by Sam Mendes. The research will focus on aspects as the life of men, women, youth and family, media and the special aspect of *Lolita* – the Americanization. The analysis based on my previous knowledge will be supported mainly by suitable excerpts of the two works and further by the theory from specialized literature and other valid sources. The two major parts of the thesis will both start with a short reminder of the plots. Moreover, this thesis will contain a brief comparison of the two eras as reflected in the works and a short conclusion will be drawn at the very end of the thesis.

Before the main body of the thesis I consider it necessary to elucidate some basic issues connected with the thesis, in order to prevent any possible prospective misunderstanding.

### 1.1. On the selection

Firstly, the analysis will originate from the study of two different media, a book and a film, which might be evaluated as a questionable choice, stemming from the fact that *Lolita* was turned into two films. Stanley Kubrick's attempt of 1962 satirically reflects the absurdity of the relationship between the two main characters, while *Lolita* of 1997 directed by Adrian Lyne focuses on the main male character and his destruction. Both films highlight their own certain aspects, therefore as a result of these different interpretations I decided to result from the original novel.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this thesis the term „American“ was chosen, however only United States will be discussed.

Secondly, the idea to compare these two particular works is based on the facts that they both deal with similar issues of the American society and there can be found many references to *Lolita* in *American Beauty*<sup>2</sup>. The most apparent one seems to be the main character, who is an older man attracted to a younger adolescent girl, or the neurotic mothers Charlotte and Carolyn. Further the name "Lester Burnham" is an anagram of "Humbert Learns", which indicates a different course of his relationship to Angela Hayes, whose name reminds of "Dolores Haze".

## 1.2. Perception of reality

*Lolita* is perceived mainly as a fictive novel dealing with one man's obsession including a 12-year-old girl. However many literary critics repeatedly made claims in the matter of its satirical character depicting America. Nabokov himself denied this opinion emphasizing, that he "had to invent America" (28), nevertheless the critics found a considerable portion of contradiction during their analysis of *Lolita*. For instance Appel Jr. suggests, that Nabokov showed a very polite attitude when opposing the critics, because America welcomed him so warmly after his emigration and *Lolita* provided him fame and wealth, but the matter of fact also concerns that Nabokov "re-created America so brilliantly" (3, p. xl). Stemming from these pieces of information, it was decided to consider *Lolita* an appropriate source for the purpose of this thesis.

An Oscar winning film *American Beauty* might be seen as a less problematic choice however a note needs to be made on how accurate a

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<sup>2</sup> One of the main impulses for Nabokov to start working on *Lolita* was obviously a criminal accident of 1948, when a 11-year-old girl was kidnapped by a 50-year-old man. They travelled over various states for almost two years and he is believed to have been threatening and raping her. This has been also mentioned in the book. "Had I done to Dolly, perhaps, what Frank Lasalle, a fifty-year-old mechanic, had done to eleven-year-old Sally Horner in 1948?" (1, p. 4)

Ball had a similar experience as he heard about the case of a 17-year-old girl shooting a woman into head because of having an affair with her 38-year-old husband. She got a nickname "Long Island Lolita" (27). The original theatre play script underwent great changes but the main idea remained.

film can reflect reality and history. Keirstead points out that any attempt to recreate history contains an amount of subjectivity, fictionalization and dramatization, since "certain elements of history lend themselves more readily to film than others" (26). Therefore both *Lolita* and *America Beauty* are only able to offer an insight into the past times of post-war and 1990s America through the stories of their characters.

In association with above mentioned I would like to introduce a quote of the great American sociologist C. Wright Mills, which provided much inspiration during the writing process: "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both." (34).



## 2. Lolita

### 2.1. Plot

The main narrator Humbert Humbert is in prison writing his own defence. As a teenager he fell in love with a young beautiful girl Annabel, but their love remained unfulfilled and soon she died of typhus.

After Annabel Humbert kept a few relationships with adult women similar to his age, although he never truly felt attracted to them and somehow despised them. His unsuccessful marriage even developed his mental issues and he ended up in a psychiatric sanatorium.

In 1947 Humbert arrives to America as an English literature teacher, where he is supposed to finish his work dealing with the French literature. By coincidence he seeks a place to live in the house of a neurotic widow Charlotte and her 12-year-old daughter Dolores, or for him Lolita. And Lolita, so much resembling of his dead Annabel, becomes the reason why Humbert decides to stay. A secret diary documents his growing temptation.

Lolita also shows her interest in Humbert. Both of them are slowly getting closer. However Lolita is not the only one who fell in love with Humbert. Right after Lolita with her mother start out to Lolita's holiday camp, he finds Charlotte's passionate confession in form of a love letter. To be able to stay in the house with his Lolita Humbert chooses to marry Charlotte.

With Lolita still in the camp, one day Charlotte get to the secret diary of Humbert. In a fit of anger, she rushes to send letters to inform about her husband's perversity. As she is crossing the street, her life ends under the wheels of a car. After Charlotte's death, Humbert decides to leave the town and take the unsuspecting Lolita on a road trip across the America.

In the beginning, Humbert convinces Lolita, jealous of their marriage, that the goal of the journey is to visit Charlotte in hospital. One morning, Lolita and Humbert get intimate. Humbert is quite surprised by her experiences, which were gained in the holiday camp. Together they travel through the country and visit numerous hotels and motels. Soon Lolita finds out about her mother's death and her behaviour towards Humbert begins to change.

The pair settles down for a while and Lolita starts to attend a girls' academy. When she also begins to disappear outside, Humbert forms a suspicion. Soon after their violent confrontation, they continue on their journey.

Humbert's suspicion arises right after he notices a familiar car following them. Suddenly Lolita gets ill and stays in hospital overnight. Humbert experiences a dreamless night as he cannot deal with his jealousy anymore. The next morning Humbert finds out that Lolita left the hospital with another man.

The shock of losing Lolita damages Humbert seriously. As a recovery he enters a relationship with an adult woman, but he cannot forget Lolita. One day he receives a letter from Lolita explaining that she is married, pregnant, and begging for money. Humbert rushes to her and finds her in a pitiful state. He gives her money and as Lolita refuses his love, he leaves and the two never meet again.

From Lolita Humbert gains information including her meanwhile life. She lived with a famous play writer Quilty, a paedophile, who promised her to take part in a film, but misused her for purposes of an erotic production. Humbert, already convinced to find Quilty, now decides also to kill him. He discovers him in the Haze's house and shoots him to death. Humbert dies in prison and Lolita while giving birth.

## 2.2. Male characters

Although the main male character of the novel is not of an American origin, the persona of Humbert Humbert can by the means of his observation and commentary still provide us a closer look at an unique aspect – the Americanization<sup>3</sup>.

As already mentioned in the introduction, Nabokov himself denied the many critics' suspicion that *Lolita* might be also perceived as a satirical portrayal of America and its society drawing on author's autobiographic experiences. However there can still be found various convincing arguments to do so, for example Haegert claims, that we can notice a large amount of similarities between Nabokov's and Humbert's first months as European immigrants in America and the emplacement of his story shall not be understood as baseless (25). Nabokov himself mentions his first time in America in his memories and exactly like Humbert, he came in his forties in the spring, being perceived as an intellectually superior European (13). According to Haegert's research, "(...) it may prove fruitful to reexamine *Lolita* both as an American novel and as a work of émigré fiction (...)" (25, p. 777-8).

Humbert Humbert is a personality formed by spending all of his existing life in Europe. Shortly after his arrival to America, he decides to take part in an expedition to Canada in order to calm his mind, which is upset by his current new home. Humbert is unsure about the object of this expedition, as some members "collected plankton" meanwhile the others "were mainly engaged in checking the influence of climatic amelioration on the coats of the arctic fox." (1, p. 1) The life in the expedition's camp he summarizes into four supplies available: "The Reader's Digest, an ice cream mixer, chemical toilets and paper hats for Christmas."

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<sup>3</sup> "Within the United States the term Americanization refers to the process of acculturation by immigrants or annexated populations (...) to American customs and values." (20).

Starting from this point, the readers might apprehend America as a simple imitation or even a parody of Europe. As the story proceeds, Humbert comments on many others of his observations and through this he only feeds the readers' (newly) gained conviction.

Another similar fact is how frightened Humbert is by the state of the Haze's household, after he visits it for the first time.

I could not be happy in that type of household with bedraggled magazines on every chair and kind of horrible hybridization between the comedy of so-called "functional modern furniture" and the tragedy of decrepit rockers and rickety lamp tables with dead lamps. I was led upstairs, and to the left – into "my" room. I inspected it through the mist of my utter rejection of it; but I did discern above "my" bed René Prinet's "Kreutzer Sonata." And she called that servant maid's room a "semi-studio"! (1, p. 1)

What also catches Humbert's attention is the girls' holiday camp Lolita is supposed to go for summer. He mentions that the camp presents itself very positively and promises to develop young girls' health, outlook and responsibility. However later it turns out that the girls are taught how to "be useful" to the others and mainly to their future husbands with their actions. On top of that, the camp serves rather as a place to gain the first sexual experiences, as one of the employees is a young boy, who spends time with the girls unmonitored.

Lolita's education continues with Beardsley school for girls. According to Humbert, this institution has a great image as its headmistress Mrs. Pratt claims to use the most modern communication methods. In fact, the girls are again only educated to become good wives, as the reader can guess from the school's curriculum, consisting of "the four D's: Dramatics, Dance, Debating, Dating" (1, p. 3). As Lindop and Capua state, in the post-war American girls and women were educated in high-schools and those from wealthy families also at universities, but the taught subjects differed rapidly from what boys and men could choose. For girls in high-schools, there were available so-called "home economy"

classes which included cooking, baking, laundry and sewing. Female students at universities had a wider range of choices, but they considered their studies rather a kind of waiting out before getting married. Pursuant to the prevailing view, a good marriage was more important than a good education for the future of a young woman (9, p. 51).

In quite brief sentences, Humbert mentions another of his "American findings". Next to the expedition, housing and education issues, he notices an increasing parental interest in children. However when it comes to Charlotte, who is reading many "modern" magazines and some popular science books discussing childcare, the results are no good. These in fact general opinions of media cannot be applied to every child, nor as problematic as Lolita. Charlotte resigns on her parenting attempts and resorts to childish arguing and mere regular noticing of Lolita's body measurements. Similar incomprehension of children minds Humbert finds in mail-order catalogues with children and teenager clothing, which contain many inappropriately revealing pieces of clothes.

During their long journey across the whole country, Humbert also witnesses even more situations, where America tries to be modern, but remains behind Europe. The large amount of various hotels and motels Lolita and Humbert stayed in when travelling wanted to leave an impression of tradition. Yet Humbert, seeing their poor interiors with decorations referring to European history and culture, perceives their trying like a mere distorted copy of Europe. One of the hotels hosts an exhibition of similarly shallow meaning as the Arctic expedition had – an exhibition of roses, awaiting tens of rose experts. Or for example, Humbert and Lolita are travelling for hundreds of kilometres to visit another "great" American tourist attraction – an exhibition of "shabby photographs of the bonanza mining period" (1, p.2). On the other hand, Humbert is enchanted by American nature and its wonders and senses its young wilderness.

Humbert's ambivalent impression of America is very well summarized in the end of the third chapter:

We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country, that, by then, in retrospect, was no more than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires and her sobs in the night... (1, p.2).

Nevertheless the American experience that affects Humbert the most is meeting Lolita, as it evokes memories of his first and only European love. Haegart claims, that as a result, Humbert becomes fixed onto her as she is the only known "thing" in an unknown new world as America represented for him. However Lolita and Humbert both origin from different worlds, as Haegart calls it, there starts a conflict of New World possibilities represented by Lolita and Old World sensibilities by Humbert's politeness, reticence and compliment (1, p. 1). This view supports the idea that Nabokov was inspired by his own personal experience.

The American approach of Europe is notable in the way Humbert is greeted and treated after his arrival. In America, he is supposed to finish a book summarizing the French literature for American students, as if without it they were not able to understand it. He is seen as a traditionalist, as "the old-fashioned Continental father" (1, p. 3).

Haegart informs, that the key to understand America and its society is not in applying European standards on it. America can also not be perceived as a new or even more modern Europe (25, p. 781-3). He emphasizes the fact that American united nation is one of the oldest in the world, dating back to 1776, on the contrary their culture lacks any deeper roots. America sees itself as the future, but as time passes by, nothing "real" fills up this empty cultural space. Humbert's failing attempt to revive the past love in Lolita might depict American own unnatural attempts to resemble the younger or even better Europe.

### 2.3. Female characters

Charlotte Haze offers us an insight into the life of an American post-war widow. She is quite good looking but neurotic at the same time, as she is dieting, taking various calming pills, dying her hair and always smoking a cigarette. Mrs Haze likes to hold banal conversation following "rules", "She was (...) one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club (...) but never her soul." (1, p. 1), play bridge, drink and tries to speak French sometimes, but her attempts are ridiculous. Humbert also notes, that Mrs Haze is looking for inspiration how to live her life and bring up Lolita in various magazines and popular science books. In spite of this, her relationship with her own daughter is full of misunderstanding.<sup>4</sup> According to Humbert's observation, Charlotte is even jealous of Lolita and hates her.

However Charlotte undergoes a remarkable change after she dramatically falls in love and later marries Humbert. She ignores the fact that actually it was her who proposed to Humbert, is quite enthusiastic as his wife and finds a new energy for her life, which she plans to use for redecorating of their house according to the newest fashion dictate of modern catalogues.

Being a post-war American woman, Charlotte grew up in an era, where women were supposed to do just one thing – create home for their husbands and children. However this homemaker role had one undoubted disadvantage – they were alone in their perfect clean houses. As Shapiro Barash states, those women believed in romantic love and under their beliefs they wanted to entry a marriage very soon. It was their life goal, because no woman's life could be complete without a man. Another reason why they rushed into marriage was sex. Premarital sex was not accepted by the society. As a post-war woman, "you were only supposed to sleep with one man and that was your husband" (17, p. 58).

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see chapter "Youth" and "Media".

However the reality came too soon and women, without any real education, only taught to be a wife, became a wife who is just a wife, sacrificing it all for the sake of a happy family.

As the readers can see in Charlotte, she was quite dependent on Humbert, idealizing and fully adoring him. "She said I was her ruler and god. (...) She said I must forgive her or she would die." (1, p. 1). Mrs Haze was also very jealous, for example after their marriage, she asked Humbert about all of his previous women. Without a man she could not find her place in life and was very unhappy, she quickly wanted to get married again and confirm the reason of her existence – to be a wife again.

## **2.4. Youth**

Especially to Humbert, Lolita might seem somehow different, but her immature behaviour and hobbies indicate that she is a little girl indeed. She often argues with her mother, her personality is shown as friendly but can also become very rude and easily offended. Lolita likes reading woman magazines and adores many Hollywood stars. She enjoys quick energetic music, dancing and wants to become an actress. The first sexual experiences she got in a holiday camp, where she was supposed to learn how to "be a useful woman". Behind Lolita's strong language there hides a sensitive girl, missing a male role model and a female one probably too. Her mother's attitude contains a large amount of competition. Lolita experienced only hypocritical attention from Charlotte, for example in form of records taking of Lolita's measures. Their ultimate conflict can be represented by this short excerpt:

"And now we all think that Lo should go to bed." "I think you stink," said Lo. "Which means there will be no picnic tomorrow," said Haze. "This is a free country," said Lo. When angry Lo (...) had gone, (...) Haze smoked her tenth cigarette of the evening and complained of Lo (1, p. 1).



Exploring the problems Lolita has might help the readers to understand the real life of an American post-war teenager. A large portion of misunderstanding was the crucial issue of their life. As Powers summarizes, the society was supposed<sup>5</sup> to see the idea of a united calm American community as a strong defence against communism and its influence during the Cold War. The impact of this view was a new conviction of media and adults – that teenagers' defiance is inappropriate and therefore should be suppressed (29). As Mrs. Pratt comments on Lolita: "Crosses her knees and wags left leg to the rhythm. (...) Sighs a good deal in class. Chews gum vehemently." (1, p. 3) These natural tiny teenage revolts like chewing gums and jeans were banned in many schools and strict rules in the matter of clothing, appearance and behaving were established.

Consequently the American youth felt kind of left-out. There were not many TV shows for them, no magazines. All attention they got from their parents was in form of rules. To gain a positive acceptance, the obedience was conditional. The only freedom teenagers had, the only place without rules was dancing. Just young musicians felt what American youth felt (29). In case of Lolita, "All she wanted from life was to be one day a strutting and prancing baton twirler or a jitterbug<sup>6</sup>." (1, p. 1). And there originated the roots of the mid 50s teenage rock'n'roll rebellion.

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<sup>5</sup> More on the media problematic you can find in the chapter "Media".

<sup>6</sup> In other words "a majorette or a swing dancer".

## 2.5. Leisure time

The characters of the novel usually spend their free time outside. Lolita with her friends from the block play together, run around or do some sports. With her mother Charlotte they tend to spend their time together, besides fighting, by activities like reading magazines, sunbathing or going for a swim to the lake with a picnic basket. Sunday church is a must. Later, in a larger town, Lolita enjoys milk bars and together with Humbert they visit the cinema very often, which is associated with the new way of spending spare time occurring after the WWII. Cinematography and Hollywood experienced big progress. "By the end of the 40s decade approximately 39% of a 150 million population attended movies every week." (19, p. 491).

Another rising hobby depicted was travelling. Lolita and Humbert are on a cross-country journey, spending nights in more than 300 various hotels, motels and pensions. They visit many exhibitions and see sometimes not so special exhibitions, considering the fact it is the only attraction in the entire state, as already outlined in the "Americanization" chapter. With their car, they travel almost through the whole United States, which possibility stems from the fact that "A modern highway system began to develop in the United States in the 1920s" (ibid., p. 728). And it took more than 25 years until travelling as a form of tourism became a topic. "Around 1947 the first travel columns appeared in newspapers" (ibid.) and there showed up many travel guides, to make people sure they will not miss anything, although these must-sees often lacked any real historical value, citing Humbert, it could be "a lighthouse in Virginia, a natural cave in Arkansas converted to a café, a collection of guns and violins somewhere in Oklahoma... (1, p. 2)".

People began to massively travel by cars since the industry was prospering as well. As a consequence many hotels and motels (motorway

hotels) were built thanks to the mass growing interest in travelling and tourism (19).

## 2.6. Media

Humbert Humbert often mentions various American advertisement and has a number of "problems" with them. His first concern suggests that some "ads" are inappropriate in the way of depicting women and young girls, as they are mixing "tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity" (1, p. 1).

This point of view can be fully supported after taking a closer look at the real situation in America. "The post-war years witnessed a significant increase in advertising in all media – print, film, radio, even television." (19, p. 14), and the real explosion of marketing came then in 1950s. The 1950s advertisement suggested that the wife should be neat and homemaking, the husband should bring money, the children should behave well. And linked to the issue Humbert points out, some printed commercial can be judged negatively, with mottos suggesting that "man is the chef, wife is for cooking" or "men are better than women, indoors women are useful, even pleasant, outdoors they are something of a drag".<sup>7</sup>

Another factor of the media industry critically evaluated by Humbert is the lack of own opinion illustrated by Charlotte's obsession to follow the latest trends shown in the magazines. "Bland American Charlotte

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<sup>7</sup> The engagement of America in the WWII provided new possibilities to demonstrate masculinity after first feminist attempts of 1920s and the Great Depression of 1930s. In war, men could shown themselves as strong soldiers who can protect their home and family. However after their return in the late 1940s, they brought many problems with them – nightmares and bad memories full of brutal violence. At the same time, their jobs were taken by women (21, p. 20). Scientists began to notice the problem of growing male timidity and immaturity (6, p. 14). They needed something to feel like men again. Thanks to the growing American economy after the WWII, women left their workplace in large numbers and men could became men again, providing economical sources to the family (9, p. 51). Nevertheless still men were not as sure as they used to be about their masculinity as we can see in sexist advertising, that puts women into submissive and sometimes degrading role. See Appendix 1.

frightened me." (1, p. 1). Further in this chapter is described how he later discovers this trait also in Lolita.

In this case the evidence of the so-called silent generation can be clearly seen. People became the real TV consumers, as this thesis has already explored, they needed their opinion to unify and wanted to live their own calm lives. Halberstam explains, that only "few Americans doubted the essential goodness of their society"(7, p. x), with a great help of the media, because "it was reflected back at them not only by contemporary books and magazines, but ... with even greater influence in the new family sitcoms..." (ibid.)

The striking effect of the media in America is even further explained in the theory of David Riesman, famous American sociologist, author of the none less famous study *The Lonely Crowd*, who introduced the term "other-directed" type of character. Similar people consider the permission from others to be the key aspect for them when making decisions about their life. Similar people are consequently anxious, as receiving so many opinions and not listening to their own inner self its very tiring. And according to his study, this represents the whole middle-class of the American society (15, p. 9-55).

Riesman claims, that this type of character direction was developed as a result of the departure from traditions and at the same time in order to keep up with the rapid changes the American society witnessed during the industrialization, developing capitalism and urbanisation period (15, p. 9-25), noticed as well by Humbert.

... commercial fashion was changing. There was a tendency for cabins to fuse and gradually form the caravansary, and ... a second story was added, and a lobby grew in, and cars were removed to a communal garage, and the motel reverted to the good old hotel (1, p. 3).

This switch caused that the American people started to massively accept the ideas suggested by the media, without taking into account any real individual aspects that every person holds.

The attitude of the adults and parents had a bad influence on the children, as seen by Riesman. Together with the rising consumerism of the early age, parents were not the role-models and authorities for their children anymore. Riesman says that children could no longer inherit the power of inner-direction, since their parents already gave it up. Instead of role-modelling and being the great example, parents became to manipulate and reason with the children. And the vulnerable child's mind began to look up to the media as a new (yet dangerous) source of "education" (15, p. 99-101).

Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. ... She believed ... any advertisement or advice that that appeared in Movie Love or Screen Land ... If a roadside sign said: Visit Our Gift Shop--we had to visit it, had to buy its Indian curios, dolls, copper jewelry, cactus candy. ... If some café sign proclaimed Icecold Drinks, she was automatically stirred, although all drinks everywhere were ice-cold. She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster (1, p. 3).

Moreover, Riesman points out that there exists another great negative impact the mass-media acceptance had on children as the generation of the future adults and parents – the manipulation of reality. (Humbert comments on American musicals) "...real singers and dancers had unreal careers in an essentially grief-proof sphere of existence wherefrom death and truth were banned..." (1, p. 3) Riesman came to the conclusion that the quick delivery of stories from the media for the children and the inaccurate depiction of a real life in it became crucial. Exactly like Lolita, other-directed children were not able to fully understand, that the reality in the stories is actually not real.

As the fake reality was the one who formed their character, therefore the real reality became fictional for them. They were not interested in the deeper moral message of the story anymore, if the story even had some. In the novel, Humbert express his disappointment by Lolita's lack of interest in quality literature. "I could never make her read any other book than the so-called comic books or stories in magazines for American females." (1, p. 3). Instead, children focused on searching for hints in the media and among friends as well, which could help them to decide who in the story is the winner. Usually it was the good-looking hero who managed to solve the greatest problems in a second. Thereby if any real person would look good enough, even if the person would show evil qualities, it would still be the winner for the hypocritically oriented child. Similar to the situation with Lolita adoring Humbert or Quilty, "...I am said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush." (1, p. 1). Riesman states an example of children wondering "how can someone be evil when they are so pretty" (15, p. 101).

## 2.7. Summary

Although *Lolita*'s controversial storyline might be perceived as the main theme of the novel, under the layer of its sexually explicit content a great depiction of post-war American society can be found. Nabokov created an exceptional story, highly valued for its uncommon combination of emotionally manipulative narration on one hand, and distant satirical portrayal of America on the other. The novel itself represents a piece difficult to interpret, however its numerous excerpts illustrate very successfully the certain major aspects of the way people lived in the above mentioned period of history.

### **3. American Beauty**

#### **3.1. Plot**

Lester Burnham goes through a typical mid-life crisis. His family is dysfunctional and he is about to get fired from his job.

During the visit of his daughter's cheerleader performance he falls in love with her teenage friend Angela. He starts to fantasize about her and after he hears Angela confessing of her interests in him, he gains courage to begin with a completely new lifestyle in order to seduce her. Lester quits his job, starts with jogging and exercising and enjoys his new job at a fast-food restaurant.

Meanwhile his wife Carolyn deals with her unsuccessful career as a real estate agent. To gain more business knowledge, she initiates an affair with "The Real Estate King" Buddy Kane.

Burnham's daughter Jane seems to be a typical 90s teenager, fighting with her parents and longing for the perfect look as she is saving money for a breast surgery. Her friend Angela constantly tells her stories containing her sexual experiences on her way to become a famous model.

Their new neighbour Colonel Fitts is a man with a strong anti-homosexual attitude and very aggressive behaviour toward his son Ricky. His wife Barbara seems to have resigned from life, she barely speaks and is steadily confused. Ricky is a former psychiatric patient, now a drug dealer, newly selling marijuana also to Lester. With his digital camera video recorder he films his surroundings. Thanks to this he and Jane start dating and Ricky shows her his opinion on beauty.

As the story continues, Lester is becoming more and more satisfied. He finally starts to enjoy his life. He also finds out about his wife's infidelity and is not even slightly worried about it.

One evening, Jane invites Angela to pass the night in the Burnhams' house. Lester senses his chance to finally get Angela and goes to the garage to do some more exercises. His wife Carolyn, playing with a gun on her drive home, rushes as she urgently needs to discuss their bad marriage situation. Meanwhile Colonel Fitts discovers that Lester is seeing Ricky and develops a theory of his son being a male prostitute. He violently confronts Ricky, who is after this incident planning to run away with Jane. Colonel Fitts then approaches Lester during his work-out in the garage and kisses him. Lester rejects his suggestion and returns into the house where he finds Angela waiting for him in the living room. They start making out but after Angela's confession, that she is still a virgin, Lester changes his mind and his attitude to Angela becomes more father-like.

As he is alone in the kitchen, realising how satisfied he actually is with his decision and how much beauty there has been in his life, someone walks in and puts a bullet through his head. Later it turns out to be Colonel Fitts.

One by one, Jane with Ricky, Angela and Carolyn are discovering Lester's body covered in blood. Most of them seem sad, but the movie ends with calm Lester's voice claiming that one day everyone might understand how much beauty there is in this world.



### 3.2. Male characters

The main male character Lester Burnham embodies a prototype of a man who is tired of his own life. He is 42, but as he claims "...dead already." (2).

One of the reasons for his miserable feelings is his job as a magazine editor. He is not considered to be an important part of the company. The viewer sees that his workstation consists of a small cubicle without any privacy, as it is surrounded by tens other identical cubicles as known from popular Dilbert comics.<sup>8</sup> After 14 years of working for the same company, he is asked to write an essay dealing with his work efficiency which will decide if he can stay or will be fired.

Lester's situation reflects the booming American economy of the late 1980s. On one hand, many new job positions were created. On the other hand, employees were just one of a crowd in the rapidly growing companies. The above mentioned economical prosperity was followed by a recession in the beginning of the 1990s decade, which led to the need of downsizing and restructuralisation (23). The so-called inefficient employees could lose their position overnight. Lester feels that people are considered "trash" that the company needs to get rid of. No one gives him any appreciation of his experience after a very long time spent in the editor's position. "It's just business." are the words of the young efficiency expert, which came to fire the unnecessary employees. This attitude brought worries about the future and their financial situation into people's lives.

Mr. Burnham also fails when it comes to his marriage. He is apparently both sexually and emotionally frustrated. His manly authority is being doubted by his wife along with his daughter. This illustrates the generation of men who became more understanding compared to the 1950s, men who are trying to be good husbands, good fathers, earn good

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 2.

money but who are lacking courage to do anything "manly" in order to stay "proper" or "polite".

To explain this behaviour, it is necessary to investigate the previous decade. In 1980s men used to look up to idols like Arnold Schwarzenegger (starring in *Conan the Barbarian* of 1982 or *The Terminator* of 1984) or Sylvester Stallone (famous for movie series *Rocky* and *Rambo*), who were action heroes known for their massive muscles and enormous constantly firing guns. With the growth of gender and feminist activities, "90s men seemed caught up in contemporary arguments criticizing the heterosexist, patriarchal, classist, and racist values traditionally underwriting the standard picture of the 'real American man'." (10, p. 9) This changing attitude turned *Terminator* into *Junior*<sup>9</sup> in 1994 and *Rambo* into *Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot*<sup>10</sup> of 1992. Both films show men developing a great empathy for women.

Malin called this phenomenon "Crisis of Masculinity" and according to his research, it became official with the persona of the American president Bill Clinton. The character of a president can show the state of masculinity of his era. He is a role model for men and children and provides a picture of how the nation sees the real manhood. Clinton was even earlier known for his tendency to interrupt the private zone of his communication partners or for great yet manipulative rhetorical skills. However it was his affair with Monica Lewinski that once for all confronted public with the "Crisis of Masculinity". This behaviour was not accepted by people and Clinton became the second president of United States who was impeached and had to make many pardons (10, p. 16-20).

As Angela expressed her sexual interest in Lester if he possessed more developed muscles, Lester takes many actions to improve his body. He goes jogging and starts to work-out together with healthier boarding in

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<sup>9</sup> In this comedy a man experiences pregnancy and giving birth. See Appendix 3.

<sup>10</sup> Life of a tough policeman turns upside-down after his mother comes for a visit.

form of fresh vegetable or fruit cocktails. Through his effort he gains more and more self-confidence. By building his body he gets a greater feeling of masculinity. This provides the viewers an insight into the way how men of his time proved their manhood – by obtaining physical signs of strength and power (8, p. 332).

Another male character, Frank Fitts, is a Colonel of U.S. Navy who enforces strict respect from his son as he wants to be called "sir" and does not accept any disagreement. He is stuck in the military ideology and is not able to solve any conflict without violence, as the following scene after an aggressive physical fight between Colonel and his son demonstrates:

Colonel: "This is for your own good, boy. You have no respect for other people's things, for authority, for..."

Ricky: "Sir, I'm sorry."

Colonel: "You can't just go around doing whatever you feel like, you can't. There are rules in life. (...) You need structure, you need discipline."

Ricky: "Discipline. Yes sir, thank you for trying to teach me. (...) "(2)

Frank hates homosexuals although he is one himself. His character reflects a man who is not able to show his feelings, a man who was not able to accept his identity and has a very low self-esteem so that he forces unlimited deference from his family. Ricky describes his father in two simple sentences: "He's just one of those people who need everybody to make the same choices he did. So he can feel good about himself." (2).

The former military law of United States offers a closer look into this issue. In accordance to it, homosexuality was incompatible with the military service. Nearly 17 000 people were discharged under new directive during 1980s (30). Although homosexual people achieved great changes in the American legislative and society during 1990s, the only thing that changed for military servants was the "Don't ask don't tell"

policy. This policy provided that no one has the right to interview marines regarding their sexual orientation, but if people somehow announce that they are gay, they will still lose their job. Still this fact does not justify Frank's actions, since he kills Lester to keep his secret of being homosexual safe.

Colonel killed Lester with a legally possessed gun. In his basement, he has tens of similar guns. In 90s the amount of American households owning a gun grew was at the highest point in history – 50% (24). Colonel's labile psychological state was not monitored by any doctor, it might be a question how did he make it into army. The major issue is the fact that in America there exists no system of state social monitoring as for example in the Czech Republic. According to the German newspaper *Die Welt*, this fact might help the public to gain a deeper understanding in the "Mad Shooters" controversy and why it occurs mainly in the United States as it is possible for psychopathic people like Frank Fitts to possess guns (32).

### **3.3. Female characters**

A great phenomenon of American 1990s society is depicted by the character of Carolyn Burnham. Compared to the 1950s Charlotte, the mother of *Lolita*, Carolyn might be considered a modern independent woman at the first sight. In fact she is enwrapped into her career, obsessed with achieving success. She refuses any failure, crying is an unacceptable demonstration of weakness. She often listens to motivational tapes of life-coaches giving various "life instructions". Carolyn keeps many affirmations in mind and keeps repeating them, for example right before her working day starts: "I will sell this house today. I will sell this house today. I will sell this house today." (2).

As McGee describes, self-help became a great issue as sales of this literature rose by 96 percent between 1991 and 1996. Every second

American bought at least one self-help publication during their lifetimes (11, p. 11). The large self-help industry provides people until these days the possibility to improve themselves, so they can gain more security when it comes to their marriage and jobs, so they can remain "marriageable" and "employable" within the uneasy and constantly changing economical and social atmosphere in America (11, p.16).

Even though she is following many "life instructions", Carolyn makes no real improvement in her life or career. In the opposite - she rather tends to do harsh actions. McGee is concerned that self-help media implanted a very strong idea into people's minds – that any failure of their life is caused by their own self and it is a weak point of their personality. According to the self-help ideology, "imperfect" people should focus on the areas where they lack and improve them (11, p.12). This message is even more significant for women, who always encouraged their husbands and sons to find their individuality but no one encouraged them. Even in the names of these publications the readers can see, that they are missing something they can find only in the books, the evidence can be clearly seen in the name of the well-known series ...*For Dummies*.

Except the unsecure situation of society, McGee highlights another reason why American people so easily accept the idea of self-help. In the end of the 20th century, Americans started to be more individual, often even narcissistic. They wanted to be independent and self-sufficient in the name of a modern American (11, p.16). Concretely in the ...*For Dummies* collection we can find harmless titles like *Cake Decorating For Dummies* but also serious examples illustrated by *Bipolar Disorder For Dummies* or *Alzheimer's For Dummies*. Separately the idea to connect Alzheimer's disease and "dummies" in one book title might be considered inappropriate. Moreover it can be argued that to handle similar medical issues by the means of a self-help guideline book instead of visiting a specialist shows a very unhealthy approach of the American society.

The only things that help Carolyn escape the stress seem to be her affair and shooting from a gun at indoor firing range. She does not feel happy but is not able to make any real solving steps, she runs away to easy gained relax. Any proprietary sexual or emotional attempt of her husband she refuses as following situation demonstrates: (Right before they are almost kissing; Lester is holding a drink bottle) "Lester, you're going to spill beer on the couch." (2).

Carolyn started her family life as a 80s' woman. Shapiro Barash states that the two past decades has seen the rapid advances in women rights. The feminist movements raised by the growing dissatisfaction of the 1950s housewives created the 70s' "working mother" and the myth of "having it all" remained in Carolyn's life (17, p. 160-1). Women still wanted to be great wives and also great mothers of obedient and well-educated children, but on top of that there was a wish to have great careers as well, which later turned into a necessity because of the economical situation of American families. The unexceptionable problem of 80s' wives was the amount of tasks they had to manage, usually without any help from their husbands, as they had their jobs and "continued the "non-work" at home, cooking, cleaning, shopping, managing household finances, family correspondence and childcare" (ibid.).

Since the working women were not financially dependent on their husbands anymore, 1980s ended up with a large number of divorces, as 30 per cent of all marriages fell apart during the first four years from the wedding (17, p. 170).

Though Carolyn's and Lester's marriage has survived the crucial decade of the 80s decay of marriage and Carolyn turned into a 90s wife, who according to the research of Shapiro Barash were fully aware of the worn-out image of the 80s wives and witnessed too many divorces. 90s American wives still could not fully count on their husbands, which stemmed from the fact, that men seemed to be a bit more understanding

but indeed not much changed as they did not participated in the family life enough. The divorce was not representing the solution anymore since marriage provided social status as a form of security. Another reason to stay married was the home and the children that the spouses had together. As a result many of the 90s wives became more selfish and decided to gain the lost energy in seeking for an extramarital affair and they refused to feel guilty about it (17, p. 195-200), as depicted by Carolyn's relationship with Buddy. Beside this they still could use divorce as a form of threatening, as Carolyn's words to Lester indicate: "Do not mess with me, or I will divorce you so fast it'll make your head spin!" (2).

The so called second wave of feminism caused that women required to equal men in every possible area. However these changes had heavy impact as under so much pressure women tended to forget their feminine side and lacked enough energy to look after the relationships in the family sufficiently. Instead they focused on their career. After the analysis of Carolyn it can be suggested that similar women seem to be emancipated, but apparently they are not happy in their new roles. At the same time women were likely to reject any traditional expressions of masculinity from men, already described in this thesis by Malin, which was intended as an expression of their independence. Compared to the 1950s American society and the sexist attitude of some men trying to prove their dominance, it may be claimed that it was women who now adopted certain aspects of this immature and discreditable behaviour. Following scene draws the viewers' attention to the issue of Carolyn trying to control her husband's sexuality – so it is connected exclusively to her:

Carolyn: "What are you doing?"

Lester: "Nothing."

Carolyn: "You were masturbating."

Lester: "I was not."

Carolyn: "Yes, you were."

Lester: "All right, so shoot me. I was whacking off!" (...)

Carolyn: "That's disgusting." (2)

On the contrary, an extremely submissive personality is embodied in the character of Barbara Fitts, Colonel's wife. The viewer might apprehend her as a person with a mental disease as she barely talks or expresses her opinion, but the evidence the film provides is not clear enough. In every event, Barbara lives like a ghost, fully under control of her despotic husband and with no passion for life. It can be argued that Barbara represents what Lester could have become, or her state might as well be perceived as how much could the 1950s wives' despair have grown in importance without the feminist movement and create a nation of similar resigned women.

### **3.4. Youth**

Angela Hayes reminds us of Lolita in many ways. The biggest difference between them is represented by the 5 years age gap. Angela possesses all the features of the ideal American girl since she has childish face with large blue eyes and long blonde hair combined with well developed female body. Angela is fully aware of her sex-appeal and seems to enjoy the attention boys and men pay her. Similarly to Lolita, she uses a very strong language. The wall in her room is over floating with pictures of idols, she wears provocative clothes and thick make-up, smokes, desires to become a famous model and discusses sex all the time. Angela may be apprehended as a vulgar brat, taking all the possible advantages of her looks. However as the film processes her true unsecure self is revealed.

A great reason for Angela's behaviour might be traced back to the never ending influence of American media, explained in chapter "Media" in the "Lolita" part of this thesis. Certain people were represented as ideals of beauty and by this means a great pressure was applied especially on young people searching for their role-models. The media beauty dictate created an impression in which beautiful people are of



higher value and their chance of becoming successful is greater. Moreover, the circumstances for young girls were much more difficult, because they were more than ever before presented as sexual objects.

Dushinsky informs that sexualization of media, where sexualization is described as a "mal socialisation which causes the precocious entry by the child into adult forms of sexual subjectivity and desire" (22, p.1), occurred in the United States in the early 1980s. The media itself brought this topic into subject in the early 1990s. New York Times article published in January 1992 deals with the opinions, that the new toy product – the play cosmetics for girls – might damage their development. However the real breakthrough of sexualization into the everyday reality was the creation of 90s teen pop and especially the lolita pop<sup>11</sup>(22).

The sexualization issue demonstrates how sex became the main topic in the American society during the 1990s, placing less emphasis on character qualities. Together with the mass production of the contraception pill and decreasing parental advisory sex grew enormously as a part of teenagers' life. The impact of this process got so far that the idea of using own sexuality to gain success became relatively common. As Angela explains in the film: "He is a very famous photographer. (...) It would have been so majorly stupid of me to turn him down." (2)

Probably the most innocent character of the whole film is Jane Burnham. In the beginning she shares some of Angela's opinions, as she is saving money for a breast surgery, wears thick make-up, participates in the same cheerleader group and listens to all her fake stories containing her sexual experiences. Jane's submissiveness stems from the fact that she believes Angela's motto which sounds: "... there's nothing worse in life than being ordinary." This simple philosophy offers us an insight into

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<sup>11</sup> In 1998, Britney Spears debuted with her song "Baby One More Time", followed by a controversial video. 17 years old Spears is wearing a thick make-up together with a school uniform that is revealing more of her body than it would be appropriate. The lyrics of the song containing phrases like "hit me baby one more time" or "show me how you want it..." was also a subject of discussion.

the minds of 1990s teenagers. Millner Jr. suggests that there were three main "musts" in 1990s teenagers' life – "fitting in, standing out and keeping up" (12, p. 34). To "fit up", one has to look good enough. At the same time, you must not "fit up" too much, as it would make you "ordinary". However after Ricky enters Jane's life and convinces her about her own unique value, Jane undergoes a great change.

Millner Jr. adds that teenagers were obsessed with their social status, which depends on who are they dating and what are they wearing (12, p. 4). This explanatory might help us to understand why Angela laughs at Jane for seeing Ricky, as she – speaking for the majority of the 1990s teenagers – perceives him as "weird". The life ideology of Ricky Fitts, who is no media victim and follows his very own ideas, as he does not try to fulfil any of the three "musts", represents the inner-directed personality type. As already stated in the "Media" chapter, this approach was not common in American middle-class society and in 1990s the situation remained the same. As a result this shows the key fact to comprehend why Ricky seems as "weird" to the American society. In fact the film provides a great indication that Ricky is the real extraordinary person of the film as meeting him changes not only Jane but Lester as well. Therefore it might be suggested that the film offers Ricky's way of life as an escape from the press of American media and society.

### 3.5. Family

If the 1950s youth were dissatisfied as their life was full of strict rules, the young people of 1990s were expected to be happy stemming from the fact they experienced much freedom. Nevertheless there exists some great conviction that it was not true.

What can be called highly dysfunctional is the Burnhams family, resulting from their common conversation during dinner time:

Jane: "Mom, do we always have to listen to this elevator music?"  
 Carolyn: "No. No, we don't. As soon as you've prepared a nutritious yet savory meal that I'm about to eat, you can listen to whatever you like." Lester: "So Janie, how was school?"  
 Jane: (suspicious) "It was okay." (...)  
 Lester: "Well, you want to know how things went at my job today? (starts talking but no one is listening) You couldn't possibly care any less, could you?"  
 Jane: (uncomfortable) "Well, what do you expect? (...) You've barely even spoken to me for months." (Jane leaves, Lester notices Carolyn looking at him critically)  
 Lester: "Oh, what, you're mother-of-the-year? You treat her like an employee. " (2)

The examination of this short excerpt leads to the conclusion that the major problem of Burnhams family is directly linked to their lack of communication originating from the real interest in each other instead of empty phrases. Discussing this aspect, some attention needs to be devoted to the significant factor which newly occurred in American families in the 1990s. According to the study of Bianchi et al. in the end of the 90s decade 78 per cent of mothers were employed (4, p. 45), together with household chores they worked average for 9-9,5 hours a day, 7 days a week (ibid., p. 57). Under these circumstances there is very little time and energy left to spend some quality-time among the family members, as every member is busy with their own tasks and mothers almost disappeared from their children's life.

It is considered a common knowledge that there have always been conflicts between different generations. In the post-war America, these conflicts started to have manipulative background and until 1990s, they became very small-minded, as the dinner conversation excerpt suggests. According to the research of Nichols and Good we can identify the main reason of the conflicts, which is again supposed to be the earlier mentioned lack of authority provided by parents and even adults in general. From all participants of their survey, "only 22 per cent of respondents in 1997 said it was common to find parents who were good role-models" and that "50 per cent parents fail to provide discipline" (14, p. 15).

Moreover, the lack of family quality conversation shows another issue – lack of respect. Nichols and Good further emphasize that this stems from situations "when adults don't spend time with youth or when youth are excluded from decisions that affect them directly (...)." (ibid., p. XI). Drawing on these facts, an advanced understanding of the Burnhams' family crisis can be developed, considering them the 1990s American family.

The film as well depicts a different type of family evaluating the Fitts, who live isolated. Their family life might be represented by one specific scene, in which the family members seem distraught by the fact that the door bell rings. Colonel: (suspicious) "Are you expecting anyone?" Mrs. Fitts: (wondering) "No... No." (2).

As already stated above, Colonel Fitts is presented as a very strict father, who is on the opposite to the Burnhams providing too much discipline and control to his only son Ricky. Despite his thorough monitoring Ricky manages to earn money as drug dealer, which shows that forced obedience does not result from respect and is indeed fake, as highlighted in the film: Ricky: "(...) my dad interferes less in my life when I pretend to be an upstanding young citizen with a respectable job." (2).

Furthermore a new kind of family appears in the movie, when the common neighbours of the Burnhams and the Fitts are introduced to the viewers – homosexuals Jim and Jim. Their sexual orientation seems to be no burden for the Burnhams, as Jim and Jim share their gardening tips with Carolyn and Lester consulted them in the matter of health and body care, which might be evaluated as the growing tolerance of gay couples among Americans, inconceivable in the 1950s. Rimmerman emphasizes, that the gay movement begun approximately in the 70s, but was interrupted by 80s AIDS issue. In 1990s gays achieved great changes in the U.S. legislation, as "by 1997 11 states passed laws banning antigay discrimination" (16, p. 274) and in the same year "Hawaii became the first state to offer benefits to partners in same-gender relationship" (ibid., p. 275). As a consequence, in the end of the 1990s every ninth couple living together was gay or lesbian (18, p. 42). this trend of increasing acceptance has continued till today – even though it is very controversial, more and more states of the US are passing laws legalizing domestic partnerships or even marriage for gay and lesbian couples.

Unlike the Burnhams, Colonel Fitts shows clear signs which indicate his deep disgust. Despite the fact that this thesis already explored the issue of his own suppressed homosexuality, it might prove appropriate to mention his dialogue with the two Jims, after they came to introduce themselves as the new neighbours: Jim: " Nice to meet you. And this is my partner." (...) Colonel: (...) "What are you guys selling? (...) You said you're partners, so what's your business?" (2). This short excerpt illustrates that for sure not every American approved of this unusual family concept.

### 3.6. Mass-media

There is one certain aspect of the film, which most of the main characters share – unhappiness. Although claims can be made that their living standards are very high, satisfaction with one's life is a very rare subject in *American Beauty*. According to the American Psychologist Association, during the 80s and 90s decades, philosophy of life as a life direction sank at its historical minimum. At the same time, goals like money and leadership reached the top (33, p. 1051). Apparently, traditional values like character and family were replaced by materialistic desires. Following quotes might help to illustrate these ideas:

Carolyn: "This is a 4000 dollar sofa (...), this is not just a couch!"

Buddy: "(...) according to her, I'm too focused on my career. As if being driven to succeed is some sort of character flaw." (2)

To discuss this issue a reminder about the role of media in people's lives need to be made. Since 1950s, media's enormous growth turned it into mass-media. Stemming from the assumption that the other-directed type of character was still prevailing in America in the 1990s, Chomsky notes that media propaganda used by the gigantic American companies established during the 80s and 90s decades implanted in people's minds a massive consuming tendency. Besides that he claims that American mass-media, under full monitoring of American government, controls people's thinking in general to support the American capitalistic system (5). This attitude has apparently created a society full of despair, where people take less interest in each other and more in money. The motivation for America to treat its people this way is briefly explained in *Sicko* – the documentary film dealing with American health insurance system created by a pronounced controversial political commentator and author of many similar documents Michael Moore:

An educated, healthy and confident nation is harder to govern. (...) there is an element in the thinking of some people who do not want people to be educated, healthy and confident. (...) They (the nation) are poor, they are demoralized, they are frightened. Therefore they think the safest thing to do is to take orders and hope for the best (31).

### 3.7. Summary

*American Beauty's* reflection of the American society can be evaluated as much more obvious, partly even calculated. The film delivers a very subjective insight into people's lives, however the certain highlighted issues correspond with historical information concerning 1990s in America. Similarly to *Lolita*, *American Beauty's* real value is to be found behind the prime impression filled with sexuality. The fact that *American Beauty* is a multiply awarded and Oscar winning act supports the prediction of its striking message, well noticed by the public.

#### 4. Conclusion

Both analysed works, Nabokov's novel *Lolita* and Mendes' film *American Beauty*, offer us insight into certain major issues of the American society.

In case of *Lolita* there is to be found a significant amount of the narrator's commentary, who evaluates the post-war and early 1950s America through the eyes of an European emigré. His remarks draw our attention namely to the Americanization, which in general helps us to gain a deeper understanding of the methods that should be applied when discussing society and its culture existing in America. Further the typical desperate 1950s wife is illustrated by the character of Charlotte and Lolita represents ia. the roots of the rock'n'roll teenage rebellion. A brief depiction of leisure time and the growth of cinematography and tourism is also provided by the novel. The narrator embodied by Humbert also puts a large emphasis on American media and its power over the other-directed American adults and children.

*American Beauty*, inspired by *Lolita*'s main theme, points out predominantly some negative aspects of American society, while showing the distinctive scenes from the lives of its characters. The range of reflected issues might be considered very wide, including the 1990s crisis of masculinity, emancipated but still unhappy women, the decay of family and increasing individualization. Moreover themes like perception of homosexuality, gun ownership or sexualization of media are explored as well. The film supports the image of the other-directed American society delivered by *Lolita*, but unlike the novel it suggests a solution how to escape the pressure that media and government apply on people.

Neither *Lolita* nor America can be evaluated as a complex depiction of the American society. However both can be considered valuable attempts, evoking the interest in further exploring of America and its society.



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## 5.4. Appendices sources

- Appendix 1                    10 Most Sexist Print Ads from the 1950s [online]. Available from: <http://www.businesspundit.com/10-most-sexist-print-ads-from-the-1950s/?img=21450>. [Posted December 2012, Retrieved 1 April 2013].
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## 6. Abstract

This Bachelor thesis analyzes two works – novel *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov and film *American Beauty* directed by Sam Mendes – aiming to elucidate what depiction of the contemporary American society the works provide. The examined aspects include particularly the life of men, women, youth, a large amount of attention is also paid to the issue of media, further the Americanization, family and leisure time are mentioned as well.

The main body of the thesis adequately combines the theory and the practice and is divided into two major parts. Each of them thoroughly deals with one work, while in the "American Beauty" part is to be found the development the American society witnessed. The analysis is based on previous knowledge of the author, which is properly supported by scientific literature and other appropriate sources. In the very end of the thesis there are three appendices to illustrate selected aspects.

## 7. Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce analyzuje dvě díla – román *Lolita* od Vladimira Nabokova a film *Americká krása* režírovaný Samem Mendesem – s cílem objasnit, jaký obraz díla poskytují o americké společnosti své doby. Zkoumanými oblastmi jsou zejména život mužů, žen, mladistvých, velká pozornost je věnována tématu média a zmíněna je i amerikanizace, rodina a volný čas.

Stat' práce přiměřeně kombinuje teoretickou a praktickou část a je rozdělena na dva hlavní oddíly. Každý z nich se pečlivě věnuje jednomu z děl, přičemž v části "Americká krása" je naznačen vývoj, jímž americká společnost prošla. Analýza vychází z předchozích znalostí autorky, jež jsou náležitě podpořeny odbornou literaturou a dalšími patřičnými zdroji. V samotném závěru práce se nachází obrazová příloha, jež dokresluje vybrané aspekty.

## 8. Appendices

### 8.1. Appendix 1

An example of 1950s printed advertisement.



## 8.2. Appendix 2

Lester vs. Dilbert.



### 8.3. Appendix 3

"Terminator" tuned into "Junior".

